MELODY IN DEATH
by
Baynard Kendrick
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# Melody in Death

BY BAYNARD KENDRICK

*The prima donna was waiting in her dressing-room for a friend who would never arrive, while on the darkened stage a killer who knew the endless labyrinth of the opera house intimately perfected his terrible plan . . . A new Duncan Maclain murder mystery*

GINA D'AURIA, youngest star of the Knickerbocker Opera Company, repeated the last few bars of the aria from *Cesare*, flooding the confines of the small rehearsal-room with an overplus of sound. She held the top note with a distinct physical effort and, breathing skillfully in spite of her weariness, allowed her strong young voice to flutter gently down. It still was not right. She knew it as soon as the last note died. A glance at the face of Paul Metcalfe, the taciturn assistant conductor, seated at the piano, confirmed her knowledge.

Instead of asking her with his unvarying politeness to try it again, as she feared and expected, Metcalfe looked at his wrist watch and closed the lid of the upright with a tiny bang. "It's half past eleven," he announced. "That's enough for tonight." He rolled up the score, tucked it under his arm, and vanished abruptly into the corridor, leaving Gina alone.

With the door left open and her own singing stopped, she could hear from another rehearsal-room the clear, powerful voice of the famous tenor, Michl Soulé. Gina listened for a moment, and then walked slowly to her dressing-room four doors down the corridor.

She sank down on the skirted chair in front of her dressing table and stared with annoyance into the triple mirror. There were lines of fatigue marring the oval purity of her face, and, unless she was careful, portending crow's-feet at the corners of her deep, intelligent black eyes. She added more by wrinkling her forehead, high and smooth beneath the classical set of her hair. She had worked like a fool, much too hard, but she wanted to be at her best when the Knickerbocker produced *Cesare*. Gina crossed her arms on the table and lowered her head to rest against them, closing her eyes to keep back unshed tears.

Her grandfather, Rodolfo D'Auria, was dead. News of his death in a Fascist prison had reached her when the Allies moved into Naples. The old musician, fierce as a falcon in his hatred of oppression, had been allowed to finish the score of *Cesare* in jail. It had been smuggled out by a friendly warden and sung for the American soldiers by a makeshift Neapolitan company, which was producing Italian operas in the open air. The break for Gina was that Benning, director of the Knickerbocker and an officer in the invading forces, was there. Wounded and discharged, Benning had returned to New York with the score of

*Cesare*. Rodolfo D'Auria was dead, but his music was very much alive.

Gina could picture his frown if the granddaughter he had trained from childhood should sing his aria badly. Her grandfather had stood for perfection. She could give him no less, since he had given her everything. That was only fair.

The sound of hammering drifted in from the stage and beat against Gina's door. Michl Soulé's singing stopped abruptly at the noisy intrusion.

THE telephone rang. She raised her head, stared at the phone with hostility, suppressing an impulse to push it from the table. Then she uncradled it and said, "Hello."

It was Jacqueline Marlowe, laughing through her words: "I'm phoning from a pay booth in a cigar store, darling. I'm just a block or two away and I'll be right up. I'm taking you out for rarebits at Reuben's."

"Jackie, I'm too tired."

"You'll always be too tired, darling, if you never play. Dane's joining us, and he'll be terribly disappointed if you don't come. Besides that, Arthur Considine's with me."

Gina sighed inwardly. Dane Marlowe and his attractive wife were more than old friends to Gina. They were powerful and important factors fn any young prima donna's career. Dane's company had made and installed the mechanical stage equipment—orchestra lifts and counterweight systems—in the Knickerbocker Opera House as well as in nearly every large theater in the country.

It was not good policy at any time to disappoint Jackie and Dane, but her weariness overcame business caution and even the lure of a midnight snack with Arthur Considine didn't tempt her. She made another try: "Jackie, I simply can't."

"I'll be right up, Gina. I have something important to tell you. You can wait five minutes anyhow and tell me how tired you are when I arrive."

Mrs. Marlowe disconnected. Gina sighed and slowly replaced the telephone.

Jacqueline Marlowe never got tired, but then it was easy to stay rested and refreshed when your husband was as wealthy as Dane Marlowe and you were further mattressed by five million dollars of your own. Gina realized she was being catty, but there were times when Jacqueline's silk-sheathed slenderness in its nutshell of mink touched her with irritation by its very unvarying perfection. Gina knew that Jacqueline's gold-blond hair would be upswept into her neat coiffure without a waving tendril, and that the mink would fall in harmonious lines even though Jacqueline had packed herself into a booth to use the telephone.

It was more trouble to compete with Jacqueline's energy than to give way to it. Gina might be dead on her feet, but she would finish up at Reuben's eating rarebit. She looked at herself in the mirror and decided that the print she was wearing must do. Jacqueline was always on time.

Gina paused with a lipstick halfway to her full red lips, her black eyes widened. The noises of the crew busy on the stage had ceased, leaving the building unnaturally quiet. Audible now in the frame of silence was the sound of somebody humming.

The melody was quaint and haunting. It reached down into Gina's heart with reminiscent fingers, holding her motionless at the table with her hand half raised. In it was the tragic history of a nation and something of slumbrous nights and velvet stars, with Italian mothers crooning a million babies to rest. In it was a slice of Gina's childhood. In it was fun and laughter, and war and death.

The humming grew closer and footsteps approached her dressing-room door. Mixed with the footsteps was something else—the scratching of nails on the concrete floor and the gentle pad of four soft paws. They came nearer.

Gina left her chair, crossed the room, and flung wide the door. The corridor was dim and she drew back startled and a little embarrassed.

A man was outside. He wore a loose English ulster of pepper-and-salt and was carrying gloves and a gray felt hat in his right hand. In the dim light of the corridor he loomed inordinately tall. He stopped both walking and humming as Gina opened the door. His left hand was clutching a U-shaped brace harnessed to the most beautiful German shepherd dog Gina had ever seen.

The dog turned its head, gazed at Gina, and yawned deliberately, exhibiting boredom by its curling tongue. The man stood rigid, as he seemed to gaze down the length of the deserted hall.

Gina said, "I'm sorry if I startled you. Were you just humming a song?"

The man's head turned slowly. Light from the dressing-room lit up furrows in his strong, mobile face and brought a strange, reflecting glint into perfect eyes. The eyes made Gina uncomfortable, for they seemed to stare straight through her, fixing their gaze on the opposite wall.

"I'll plead guilty to humming, but it's not exactly a song." He smiled, and his whole face came alive, creasing itself into tiny hills and valleys with a marvelous play of expression which reached from his square-cleft chin to his crisp dark hair. His eyes stayed blank, still holding her. It took her several seconds to reach the conclusion that the man was totally blind.

SURPRISE at his ease and self-assurance immediately blanketed her first, quick surge of pity and momentarily drove from her mind the reason why she had stopped him. It was difficult enough for a person with eyes to negotiate the backstage tiers of the Knickerbocker Opera House. The hall itself was cluttered with lockers, trunks, and scattered props left over from many operas. An archway thirty feet to the left of Gina's dressing-room led to the vast stage, where the traps in the floor and the jumble of scenery and ropes made walking dangerous even for a sure-footed stagehand.

*Gina paused with a lipstick halfway to her full, red lips. Her eyes widened*

ILLUSTRATED BY JANE HUTTENLOCH

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

GINA D'AURIA
*Lovely prima donna*

ARTHUR CONSIDINE *Pianist*

MICHL SOULÉ
*Operatic tenor*

PAUL METCALFE
*Assistant conductor*

ED TRAPPER
*Business manager*

JACQUELINE MARLOWE
*Art patroness*

DANE MARLOWE
*Her wealthy husband*

PIETRO NUCCI
*Italian sculptor*

LARRY DAVIS
*Police inspector*

CAPT. DUNCAN MACLAIN
*Blind detective*

He brought the melody to her mind again, speaking reflectively: "I've been listening to Michl Soulé rehearse the tenor part of *Cesare*. The melody I was humming is part of the tenor aria. I'm an old friend of Michl's and privileged, I guess, on account of my blindness. Not many outsiders get to hear rehearsals."

"No," said Gina, "they don't." She touched his arm with her fingers. "I'm Gina D'Auria. My grandfather composed *Cesare*. I'm waiting for a friend here in my dressing-room. If you have a few minutes I wish you'd come in and sit down."

"That's kind of you," he said without hesitation. "I'd love to."

She guided him in from the hall, the German shepherd keeping close to his side until they reached a chair.

"I'm Captain Duncan Maclain, and this is Schnucke," he told her as they settled down.

"I'd guessed that already," said Gina. "Michl and Jacqueline Marlowe have both mentioned you."

"Oh, so you know Jackie, too. Of course. I'd forgotten that she is practically godmother to the opera."

"As a matter of fact," said Gina, "I'm expecting her here right now. She phoned from a couple of blocks away that she'd be right over."

THE Captain took out a heavy silver case and offered her a cigarette.

Gina said, "That's another of life's pleasures forbidden by my singing. But smoke if you want to. It doesn't bother me at all."

She watched him as he flashed his lighter and applied the flame with neat precision. Then, picking up a silver tray, she placed it on the table beside him.

Maclain smoked thoughtfully, inhaling with enjoyment, letting the smoke trickle out slowly from mouth and nostrils. "I'm curious," he said frankly, depositing some ashes accurately in the tray.

"About me?"

"About the melody I was humming. Your grandfather wrote the opera and you're singing in it. How is it you didn't know it was part of the score?"

"Because it happens to be in the tenor part, and I'm a soprano. I probably won't hear the whole opera until the first rehearsal with the orchestra, and I haven't had a chance to look over the score in its entirety since Benning brought it back from Italy. All the principal parts are rehearsed separately, as Michl has probably told you."

The Captain nodded and rumpled his crisp dark hair. "My blindness has endowed me with an insatiable lust for asking questions. Jackie's probably told you that. If I become presumptuous, you can always throw me out. But there was something more than idle curiosity in your voice when you asked me about that song."

She was silent for a moment, toying with a gold-backed mirror. "When I was six or seven, my grandfather composed it for my brother and me. Our parents died when we were babies and we lived with our grandfather in Naples. We had a governess who was very strict and who thought that sweets were bad for children. Grandfather used to hide candy and cookies in the piano. When we'd come in from playing he'd casually give us the signal by humming or singing that little song."

She paused and put the mirror down. Maclain snuffed out his cigarette in the tray. As though it were a signal, a burst of song came from across the stage, flooding the opera house with a good-night accolade from Michl Soulé.

Gina said, "My brother died when he was ten. Later I translated the Italian words of the song into English. It makes a little rhyme. Would you care to hear it?"

The Captain nodded.

She sang very softly,

*"The laughter of happy children*
*Is the memory of a dream.*
*The little prince and princess*
*May not be what they seem."*

The Captain touched his braille watch.

"I hadn't heard it for years," Gina said. "Not until I heard you humming it. To think that he put it in his opera for me and I didn't know until now."

Her dark eyes closed and her thoughts went back to Naples—the smell of the harbor and fishing boats and the ragged sails—a villa on the white, dusty road, and children playing in the sun.

WHEN she opened her eyes again she saw that the Captain was listening. His finely chiseled head was tilted at the slightest of angles. His strong, fastidious hands were crossed in his lap, the nervous fingers in repose. Only one well-shod foot was moving as he gently stroked the back of the dog beside him with a polished toe.

The leather-bound clock on Gina's dressing-table showed five minutes to midnight. She said, "It's almost time for the night stage crew to come in. Jackie must have got sidetracked some place."

"Does she know where your dressing-room is?" The Captain asked the question as though his own smooth voice might disturb his concentration.

"She's been in here a dozen times."

"Theaters fascinate me," said Duncan Maclain. "Theaters and all types of auditoriums. They're the only buildings I know of constructed to enhance the qualities of sound."

He stood up abruptly. "I have to identify my friends by voices and footsteps, Miss D'Auria. I live in a world of sound. If Jackie got sidetracked, it was somewhere here in the opera house. I'm certain I heard her footsteps on the stage many minutes ago. She was crossing with someone else just as Michl started to sing. If you'll take my arm we might go out and look around."

Gina said, "She was probably with Arthur Considine. He drove her down."

They went to the door together. Schnucke pressed close to her master's left side, then dropped back and hesitantly settled herself on the floor again as he gave a command to lie down.

Gina opened the door and guided the Captain through, her hand nestled lightly in his arm.

Maclain walked with confident stride beside her, his lithe, well-knit body standing straight and strong.

She turned him right, through the arch at the end of the hall, and stopped in the wings, pressing closer to him. A single dim worklight burned straight ahead, lost in the vastness of a sixty-foot stage that was nearly a city block long. Far overhead two other lights shone dimly, helping not at all. Darkness swept on up above them to touch the gridiron, where, during a performance, high-perched workmen looked down on the singing puppets eighty feet below.

Gina forced herself to speak: "I don't see

*Running toward Gina, he suddenly flung his heavy body straight through the air at her*

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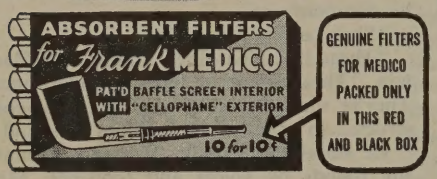
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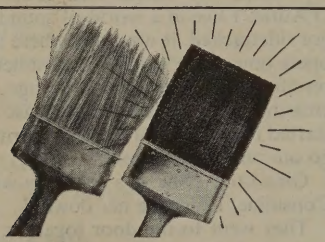

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any sign of anyone. If those were Jackie's footsteps you heard, she must have gone." Her voice sounded flat and dead, smothered with silence.

Far above her, a man laughed. The laughter was leaden, too, striking incongruously into the darkened silence, chunks of mirthless sound tumbling over the railing of the scene painters' fly sixty feet overhead and plummeting swiftly down.

"The night crew's coming in," said Duncan Maclain. "Suppose we cross the stage and see if the doorman's seen anything of Mrs. Marlowe."

"She couldn't have been here."

"Come along." He was moving forward, assuming the role of leader himself, dragging her into nothingness.

"I think we'd better wait until the night crew comes in and puts on some lights," said Gina. "I can't see very well, and I'm afraid the stage would be hard to cross even with your skill in the world of sound."

He chuckled, and the sound reassured her.

"What are you laughing about?" she asked him.

"People with eyes," he said. "The blind have an edge on them. We never have to worry when the lights are out or even when they're turned down."

They were close to the edge of the proscenium arch, where Gina had so often made an entrance to take a bow before the great gold curtain. To their left was a cubicle in a dented niche about the size of a large clothes closet, set in the edge of the proscenium arch. There, during each performance, a stagehand stood to raise and lower the great gold curtain.

Gina said, "If a dog can lead you, I can, too."

TWO steps onward, the Captain stopped abruptly, as though some giant magnet had glued his feet to the ground. The arm that Gina was holding straightened, barring her way. She peered through the dimness, searching his face, and found it tight and knotted with a worried frown.

"What's the matter?" Her mouth was dry.

"Mind where you step," he told her, and suddenly bent to touch one finger to the floor beside his shoe. Straightening, he held out his hand with a finger extended.

Gina moistened her lips and leaned closer. In the feeble light of the night bulb, the tip of his finger looked brown.

"I feel faint," she told him weakly.

He said quite softly, "Go back to the dressing-room and sit down."

For the moment, she could not move. His arms extended before him, he found the door to the cubicle and disappeared inside. Then, hypnotized, Gina followed, groped for a hanging light, found the chain, and pulled it. The Captain was standing by a big, red sign, his hand on an empty leather sheath which was fastened to the wall. Close to the sign and the empty sheath, a taut, heavy rope extended from floor to ceiling.

Gina's lips moved numbly, mumbling the words on the sign:

IN CASE OF FIRE USE THE KNIFE TO CUT THIS ROPE TO DROP THE ASBESTOS CURTAIN

*The knife must not be removed from here under penalty of the law.*

Gina moved one foot, and found that the sole of her shoe was sticky.

The Captain said, "I warned you to go to your dressing-room."

Again she found she could not move. Her eyes were held to Jacqueline's slender body stretched out straight in an angle of the wall. The fur of the dark mink coat was matted where the knife hilt stuck up sharply in back, casting a single shadow against the upswept golden hair.

"Look!" Gina breathed, and pointed, forgetting he was blind.

"I don't need to look," she heard him say. The words were tiny, irresistible hammers beating at her through an enveloping dizziness. Gradually they shut out everything and sent her mercifully slumping to the floor. . . .

Gina coughed against the sharp, choking fumes of smelling salts and turned her head. The smelling salts followed persistently, scratching at her throat and searing her nostrils. Her eyelids fluttered, and the naked lights of her dressing table hurt her with their brightness. She shut them out quickly, trying to find blackness again. Firm, gentle fingers closed on her wrist, and a voice muttered something in soothing French to the effect that she was going to be all right.

A hand rested on her forehead. She raised her lids and stared up mistily into the gentle, sympathetic eyes of a seal. No, it wasn't a seal—it was a man in a sleek fur coat, his round, comical face furrowed with worry.

"She's chilled perhaps, *non?*" The man in the fur coat spoke English that was touched with the accent of many languages fluently mastered. There was only one man in the Knickerbocker who lived in a world where the atmosphere remained at a constant point of freezing. That was Michl Soulé.

Gina reached up and closed her fingers around the hand on her forehead and clung to it tightly. The mistiness of her eyes decreased and revealed two other faces floating above the satin couch on which she was lying.

One was Ed Trapper, her manager, his silvery white hair brushed tightly back and slicked as tightly down, his businesslike pale blue eyes under the heavy white brows touched for once with a glint that might have been softness.

THE other face thrilled her and warmed her inside. It was a face that depicted joy and sorrow and understanding, with a hint of fiery passion in the delicate set of the lips—things that its owner could wring from a grand piano with a touch of his tapering fingers. The face belonged to Jacqueline Marlowe's latest protégé, twenty-five-year-old Arthur Considine. He grinned at Gina reassuringly, and the grin was as helpful as a draught of golden wine.

"Come, come; snap out of it, Gina baby." Ed Trapper's smooth voice struck against her with fatherly slaps. "You're old enough not to be pulling faints. You're apt to cook your voice for the opening. That would be fine."

"The voice, the voice." Michl shrugged, raising two waves of shimmering fur, then touched his throat above the coat collar with a finger and emitted one clear liquid note. "Always it is the *voice!* Never what is in here." He slapped his heavily padded heart. "It is freezing in this room. Does anyone care for *me?*"

From the other side of the dressing-room Captain Maclain said, "If it's eighty in this place, Michl, it's a hundred and nine."

Gina forced herself to sit up. For the moment she had completely forgotten the Captain and Schnucke. His back was toward her.



What happens to a famous beauty when she loses her beauty? See page 44

He had shed his overcoat and was standing in front of her dressing table. His sentient fingers flitted from object to object with the delicacy of a gardener testing new buds on a vine.

"Are you looking for something, Captain Maclain?" Arthur Considine's voice sounded strained and hard.

"The police will be here any minute now." Maclain sat down on the bench with his back to the make-up table. "They're naturally inquisitive, but Inspector Davis is a very close friend of mine. The more I know about the room I'm in, the more I can save him time."

The telephone rang. Ed Trapper started forward, but the Captain reached around without turning his head and lifted the phone from its cradle.

Gina sat quite stiffly on the edge of the couch and tried to read something from the Captain's immobile face. It was strange that a face which could portray so many emotions by a lift of the eyebrows or a twitch of the mouth could remain so impassively blank, staring unseeingly back at her over the phone.

"I'm sorry to tell you that your wife's met with a serious accident." The Captain's lips were moving.

Dane! She'd forgotten about Dane.

"Yes, it's serious. You'd better come right down."

THE door opened quietly and a man stepped in, closing the door behind him. He backed up against it and traveled the room with his quick-moving eyes. At the sight of Gina he took off his hat. His close-clipped mustache was sandy and touched with gray. He was not much more than five feet ten, but the clever drape of his well-cut coat and his slim, hard-muscled erectness made him look tall.

Maclain said, "Inspector Davis, unless I'm mistaken. Good Lord, Larry, it took you long enough to answer my call."

The inspector removed his gloves, packed them together, and put them in his overcoat pocket. "Have I got B.O. or something, Maclain?"

The Captain smiled and shook his head. "It's your footsteps, Larry. I've told you a hundred times. They're unmistakable. I heard you when you came up to the door five minutes ago. You've been standing out there in the hall."

The inspector's eyes were on Soulé. "Are you going or coming?" he demanded, his eyebrows drawn together.

"I am freezing, monsieur," said Soulé, and hunched himself into a ball.

"What's your name?"

Michl unwound, rose, and faced him. "I resent that question, monsieur," he announced with furry dignity. "It proves one of us very ignorant. I have supported a so-called press agent and his entire family for some ten years. Either I am very ignorant for having supported him, or you are very ignorant for not knowing that my name is Michl Soulé and I sing. In answer to your first question, which I also consider insulting, I am going."

"Where?" asked Davis.

"To my dressing-room, where it is warm enough to avoid encroaching pneumonia. It's across the stage to the right, at the end of the hall. You can find me there if you need anything." He brushed the inspector firmly aside and ambled out.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Davis. He leaned out into the hall and yelled, "Be care-


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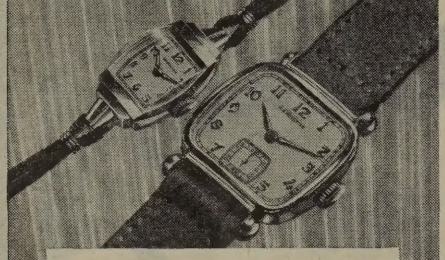

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ful you don't trip, Caruso. You'll never get up if you fall."

Inside again, he took out a clean white handkerchief and wiped his forehead. "How many singers are there in this place?" he inquired of Maclain.

"Well, there are three to four hundred people involved in every production," the Captain told him. "They're not necessarily all singers."

"They will be with me on the case," said Davis. "And I'm the guy that'll have to interview them all."

Davis, having disposed of Michl, found a toothpick in his pocket and began prodding his clean, white teeth, while he leaned inertly against the wall.

ARTHUR found a straight-backed chair and perched rigidly on the edge. Ed Trapper looked around and, finding no other place to sit, settled himself on the couch beside Gina.

Trapper, who never could wait long for anything, began to fidget, and finally bellowed, "Great God, man! Why are we wasting time?"

Davis said, "I thought if I waited long enough somebody'd tell me who made that telephone call."

Everyone looked at the Captain.

"Dane Marlowe," said Duncan Maclain.

"Her husband?"

The Captain nodded.

"Where from?" Davis planted his feet more firmly and slid a couple of inches lower against the wall.

"From Reuben's."

"Who was he calling?"

Gina said, "Jackie and I were to meet him, and I guess he wondered—" She was surprised to find that her voice sounded calm.

"That's right," Arthur put in eagerly. "I drove her down from her house to pick up Gina. We were—"

"Let's take one thing at a time," Davis interrupted. "We won't get any place if I try to listen to you all. Now, let's see. Captain, you answered the call?"

Again Maclain nodded.

Arthur slid back farther on the chair, tugging at his lower lip.

"Are you sure he was at Reuben's?"

Maclain said, "They have an operator there. If you have any doubts about it you can easily check the call. He should be here any minute now. He said he'd come right down."

Someone rapped on the door. Davis stepped outside, closed the door behind him, and was back again in a minute.

"Let's begin at the beginning." The inspector took out a notebook and resumed his task of holding up the wall.

He was staring at Maclain, and Gina was a couple of seconds late in answering when he asked, "You're Gina D'Auria, the opera singer?"

Ed said, "Yes, and she had nothing to do with this at all."

The inspector studied Trapper's white hair, appraised the cut of his pin-stripe suit, and settled on his twenty-five-dollar shoes.

"I'm Edward Trapper, her manager. She's scheduled to open here in a few nights in her grandfather's opera, *Cesare*. Miss D'Auria spent a lifetime training—"

"You've got me all wrong, Mr. Trapper." The inspector raised a restraining hand. "I'm on the staff of Police Headquarters, not a newspaper. There's a woman outside with a knife in her back."

Gina said, "Please, Ed. I'm quite all right," and put her hand on Trapper's arm.

"Thank you, Miss D'Auria." Davis's stern face softened. "Now, suppose you tell me just why Mrs. Marlowe was meeting you here and just what happened."

Gina told him quietly, keeping her hand on Trapper's arm.

The door opened and Dane Marlowe, white as marble, stepped in. He was as tall as Maclain, and as straight and well-knit. A short, black mustache swept up over his wide, straight mouth, giving him a slight Mephistophelian air. Wide, deep-set eyes glittered under slightly curved black eyebrows.

Gina, who had seen him in many moods, was shocked into silence. He closed the door very softly behind him and stood swaying a

*Herb Williams*

**"Not so fast! That wallet belongs to this gentleman. . . . I just dropped it"**

trifle, as though the wound might have been in his own straight back.

The Captain said quietly, "Hello, Dane."

The sound of his words appeared to stiffen Marlowe. In a single breath he blurted out, "I'm glad you're here, Maclain. How about taking this over for me. Have you got any whisky, Gina?"

Arthur stood up and said, "Here, Mr. Marlowe, take this chair."

Gina went back of the screen in the corner and poured him some whisky from a half-filled bottle. When she returned to where Dane Marlowe was sitting, he took the whisky without a word, tossed it down, and gazed at the inspector with a maniacal stare.

"Are you the police?" His voice was cutting.

"Yes," said Davis, and gave his name.

Marlowe said, "Well, if you're in charge, what the hell's the idea of letting her lie out there?"

The inspector said, "I'm sorry."

Dane suddenly broke. He set down the glass and pressed his fingers hard to his eyes. His shoulders trembled. Speaking from between his hands he said, "Hell! I know there are things to be done. But I didn't know how bad it was, and the sight of her got me. Her eyes that were always so full of fun—staring up at me with that frightened stare."

He removed his hands and raised his head toward Arthur: "You drove her down here, Considine. Where were you when Jackie was murdered? This might not have happened if you had been there."

Gina whispered, "Oh, Dane."

The Captain spoke as smoothly as rolling marbles: "If you let the inspector handle this, Dane, you'll save a lot of heartaches and headaches. I'm sure you will find him impartial and very fair. Larry tolerates my butting-in because I really try not to interfere."

The inspector said softly, "I'm certain Mr. Considine can tell us why he wasn't there."

ARTHUR walked to the side of the dressing table and steadied himself with one hand. The Captain lit a cigarette, fitted it into his holder, and held it between two fingers. Schnucke glanced up as he flashed his lighter, then settled her head on her paws again, looking up from under at the smoke rising into the air.

"Mrs. Marlowe helped finance my musical education—a loan, no more."

He was struggling to find the right words and Gina wanted desperately to help him. Everything in life was a struggle for anyone as sensitive as Arthur, or for any musician. No matter how he put it, financial help from a woman as beautiful as Jackie was going to sound bad to the practical police.

Davis had it already. "Your musical education?"

"I'm a pianist."

"He's an artist, Larry," said Duncan Maclain. "He takes the steel strings out of a piano and puts in heartstrings. Now, suppose for once you skip riding someone and let him tell his story in his own sweet way."

"I was introduced to Mrs. Marlowe at a concert given by the conservatory where I was studying," Arthur began. "She took an interest in me—"

Dane picked up the glass beside him, looked at it, and found it was empty. "Enough interest," he remarked, quite low, "that up until tonight I always thought you called her Jacqueline."

Color rushed into Arthur's face, and his hand pressed more tightly on the table. Gina felt her own cheeks grow hot in a wordless protest.

The inspector dug his toothpick out from his pocket again and broke it in two. The snap sounded loud. He examined the pieces as though he had never seen them before, and finally restored them to his pocket.

Maclain took a placid puff of his cigarette and raised his eyebrows enough to attract attention. "I called her Jackie," he remarked, speaking to no one. "Gina called her Jackie. Nearly everyone connected with the opera who knew her called her Jackie. It makes the use of her full name Jacqueline sound quite formal to me." He swung his sightless eyes toward Dane. "Shock is apt to warp our perspective, Dane. Don't you think that's true?"

"If you'd seen her eyes," said Marlowe, "you'd be crazy, too." He left his chair and vanished back of the screen, and returned with his glass half filled with liquor.

Trapper slicked his smooth white hair still slicker and said kindly, "Go on, Arthur; spill it. Let's get this finished. Skip the background and start with this evening. I was in the publicity-room looking at clippings and waiting for Michl when this thing happened. What did you do?"

"Gina was to join us for dinner at Larue. She had to rehearse and couldn't come." He was speaking with mechanical stiffness. "We had dinner together and Jacqueline asked me to come to the house on Fifth Avenue. She

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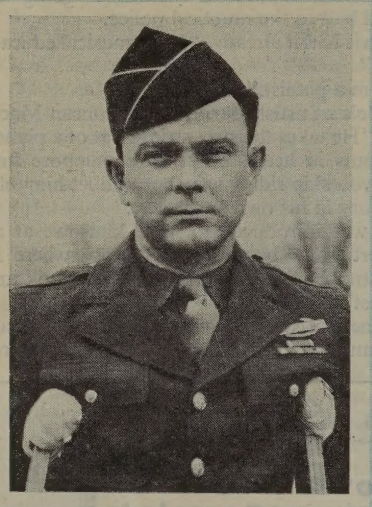
# BY THE WAY...

➤ KENNETH THOMPSON, the illustrator who painted the map for *Fencing In Hirohito*, on page 29, is a self-styled "Dixie Purist." By that he means that when he "boogies" at the piano while two other top-notch illustrators and a famous cartoonist make with the jive on the drums, bull-fiddle, and clarinet, they restrict themselves, as far as music is concerned, to a delayed two-beat swing that is known as "Dixieland." Besides making maps for THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE, Ken is currently doing an 8-hour stint with the Army Air Forces Combat Film Division, producing maps for a weekly news reel digest that is sent to our men at the battlefronts. A member of the American Water Color Society, he used to exhibit at their shows once each year before the pressure of his wartime work became too great. Most of his night-time hours (Ken sleeps about 5 hours a day) he spends doing free-lance illustrations for swank advertisements. His wife, Mary, can frequently be recognized in these, posing in a frilly apron or busy at a household chore. Young Kenneth, age 7, is busy these days studying geography maps with an eye to the future.

➤ That full-blooded German shepherd dog on this month's cover is Jeff, a Marine Corps war dog, whose serial number is 479-USMCR. According to his handler, Pvt. Francis White, who speaks for him, he is from a farm "Way Down in Indiana" and he has a specialist's rating. His specialty is the detection of land mines. After discovering one, he stands by and points, just as a bird dog would in the pursuit of game birds. White, a former Long Island kennel owner, helped train the dog at Camp Le Jeune, N. C., the Marine Base for Training Dogs. Jeff's little cocker friend who appears with him on the cover, is obviously no relation, but it's a cinch he'll miss his pal, who is presumably with a Marine Unit in the Pacific at this writing.

➤ This department had the pleasant privilege of meeting Georgia Carroll, the "Gorgeous Georgia" who appears on page 126 of THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE'S *Interesting People* section, as long ago as 1940, when she was modeling furs in midsummer and bathing suits in midwinter (we met her in the winter). We are able to recall that she was thrilled to death with her job—she made $50 the first week, $200 her fourth—and told us that she would give up modeling for only one other career: marriage. That's why we were amused to see that she *had* given it up, not for one other career, but for two others: marriage and the movies.

➤ Not all of being a correspondent in Washington is the desperate shadowing of Big-Time Operators in search of world-shaking stories. Hubert Kelley, staff writer and *By the Way's* own Washington informant, dispatched this jazzy bit via courier. A new game is about to sweep the capital. It's called *Rhymie* and you play it by matching a definition with two rhyming words of two syllables each. Thus, to the definition "An important merchant of shredded tobacco," you should answer with the words, "ciggie biggie." "An equine figure on a carousel" is obviously a "phony pony." The trick is to make your definitions sound as erudite and imposing as possible. And it helps to have your Rhymie in mind before you make your definition.



*Sgt. Tom Oliver*

➤ *By the Way* was proud and happy to greet young Tom Oliver, who was in the office the other day. Tom was once this magazine's mail clerk and messenger. Now he wears the Expert Combat Infantry Badge, the Purple Heart, and the ETO Ribbon, and is a sergeant back from Germany with a leg that will keep him on crutches for some time to come. We can remember when Tom was so shy he never had a word to say. We can also remember that when he wasn't around when we wanted him, he was probably in an adjoining office watching baseball scores on the ticker tape and rooting fervently for the New York Yankees. Tom isn't shy any more—far from it. In spite of his wound, the war has made him exuberant, and we think he had something important to say. Someone asked him, as all returning servicemen must be asked, "When do you think the war will be over?" Tom turned serious for a minute. "You know," he said, "nobody at the front ever even makes a guess. They all know that right up to the last second, maybe even a little later, some of their buddies are going to be killed and wounded." We think all of us could take a leaf out of Tom's book and, instead of worrying about the war's end before it's over, put out with a lot of bonds and blood and tools of war.—R. B. H.

was arranging a concert tour for me and wanted me to play several of the numbers."

Dane swallowed half of his whisky noisily. Arthur stopped with resentment, his face growing darker.

The Captain took two more puffs and snuffed out his cigarette. Gina felt that some mental clairvoyance had drawn him a picture of every resentful line on Arthur's face and the antagonistic set of Arthur's body.

He confirmed her intuitive guess by saying, "There's nothing more difficult than being meticulously accurate under stress, Mr. Considine. You have all my sympathy and everyone else's. A murderer not only kills one victim. He invariably reaches out a number of horrible tentacles that strive to crush others.

"Minor facts have become important. You went to Mrs. Marlowe's home and played the piano. The inspector is interested in everything that happened from the time you got there until the time you left—messages, phone calls, visitors, guests, and plans. I'm merely trying to make helpful suggestions. What, exactly, did you and Mrs. Marlowe do?"

ARTHUR visibly relaxed under the Captain's soothing, and some of Gina's own uncomfortable tenseness left her.

"I was driving Jacqueline's town car. She didn't like to drive herself. We drove uptown from Larue. The maid let us in, and Jacqueline asked if Mr. Marlowe was home. The maid said no, but that he had telephoned and left word he'd call later."

The inspector moved his head a quarter of an inch toward Dane, who said, "That's true."

"We went into the music-room and Jacqueline showed me the original score of *Cesare*, which Gina had lent her. I played part of it for her."

"The tenor aria, by any chance?" asked Duncan Maclain.

Davis tugged his mustache and said, "The night's still young. Let's send for the freezing tenor and get him to sing it. Then we might put in a call for a music critic and get him to give him an interview."

"This part, Arthur?" the Captain asked unperturbed, and hummed the little song which had introduced him to Gina.

"No," said Arthur, puzzled. "I don't believe I played that."

The inspector muttered, "All I need is *Mairzy Doats*."

"Thank you, Arthur," the Captain said calmly. "Go ahead."

"Jacqueline telephoned here three times during the evening. We got no answer."

"I was in the rehearsal-room," said Gina.

The back of her mind was filled with a tiny, tinkling carrousel repeating over and over again the words of her grandfather's little song. Was it playing also in the Captain's quick brain? Why had he wanted to know if Arthur had played that song?

"Jacqueline had a caller, a man, about half past ten." Arthur looked at Dane and paused, as though expecting a question that might help him go on.

The Captain supplied it: "Did you get his name?"

"The maid who announced him said he refused to give it."

"She was always having mysterious callers —musicians and singers needing money," said Dane.

"Let's hear about this one, Arthur," suggested Maclain.

"I don't know anything about him except that he was a bent old Italian with a lot of matted silver hair. He said he wanted to speak with Jacqueline in private. So I stepped out into the hall and smoked a cigarette."

The Captain asked, "You're sure he was Italian?"

"He spoke it," said Arthur.

"Do you?"

"Quite fluently. I stayed in the hall about fifteen minutes, looking at a magazine that was on the table. He did most of the talking, speaking very low, but I didn't hear anything. When the maid showed him out, I went back in again."

"And that was all?" asked Maclain.

"There was something I forgot," said Arthur. "When he came in the room he spotted the score of *Cesare* which was standing on the piano. He went over to it, Gina, and repeated your grandfather's name."

"You say he was bent. Could he have been a hunchback?" asked Duncan Maclain.

"Perhaps. Or very old," said Arthur.

The tiny carrousel stopped its whirling in Gina's brain.

"He was my grandfather's friend." She spoke aloud, her hand clenched tight. With an effort she disengaged her aching fingers and pointed toward the dressing table, flanked by two heavy, framed bronze plaques. Everyone turned except Duncan Maclain.

"He was the best-known sculptor in Naples," said Gina. "His name is Pietro Nucci. When I was a child he cast those plaques of my brother and me. Grandfather had them fixed to the gateposts of his villa outside of Naples. It was a whim of his to have them there." Her soft voice trembled. "He said we were both so beautiful he wanted us out where all the world could see. They stayed there until six years ago, when Jacqueline made a trip to Italy; Grandfather got word to her by the same friendly guard who smuggled out his opera. The plaques were all the Fascists had left him. Jackie drove out and found they were still on the gateposts. She took them down and brought them home to me."

The Captain got up and felt the two plaques, tracing their outlines and touching each of the faces with reverent dignity. He turned and said, "They are signed by Nucci."

Davis crossed the room and looked, his eyes held close to the metal. "There are times," he said, "when I wish I had fingers that could see."

THE Captain said, "Gina, I'd like to look over the room where you rehearsed tonight. I wonder if you'd take five minutes and act as guide?"

Davis asked, "What are you up to now?"

The Captain smiled. "This is a matter of music, Larry. You'd better leave it to Gina and me."

She took his arm and led him outside, her thoughts still whirling dizzily. Once again he left Schnucke gazing inquiringly. As the door closed on the others, the Captain stopped.

"The rehearsal-room's down this way," said Gina.

"We'll rehearse right here," said Duncan Maclain, and bent quite close. "The blind get funny hunches, probably because they can't see. It's better that I frighten you than to have you found like Jackie." He paused, then quoted softly, "'The little prince and princess may not be what they seem.' Until we find out what they really are, you'd better stick close to me." . . .

It was after two when the Captain's limou-

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sine slid to a stop in front of Gina's apartment house on East Eighty-second Street. The quiet neighborhood was dim, and frozen into desertion by the penetrating cold.

Cappo, the Captain's giant Negro chauffeur, left his seat behind the wheel and held open the door.

Maclain said, "I wish you'd change your mind, Gina, and be my guest until this blows over. My partner's wife, Mrs. Savage, has been my secretary for years, and looks after my penthouse for me, too. He's away with the Intelligence Corps in Washington, and we have plenty of room."

Gina set her chin. "I can think of no one in the world who would want to harm me, Captain Maclain. I'm certainly not going to start jumping at shadows and inconveniencing you."

"You weren't able to think of anyone who would want to harm Jackie," said Maclain.

SHE reached out and took his hand. "You've been wonderful tonight to me—and to Arthur. I don't think either of us could have stood that inquisition if it hadn't been for you."

Maclain said, "I like your singing. And your bravery, too." He handed her a card. "This is my private telephone. Call me if you need anything. Sometime in the morning I'll probably call you."

"You're not angry with me, are you?"

"Years ago," the Captain told her, "I learned that life held two futilities. Trying to change the mind of an artist is one. The second—still more hopeless—is arguing with a stubborn girl."

Cappo aided her across the icy sidewalk and up the steps, and waited while she traversed the darkened vestibule and stepped into the dimly lit hall. Gina thanked him and stood still, her fingers tight about her handbag, until he left and the limousine rolled away.

Once it was gone she found that the familiar old apartment house had unaccountably changed. The long, tiled hall made a narrow path between duplicate marble stairways at front and rear. On each side of the path two blank, impersonal doors faced each other with mute antagonism.

She was beginning to learn what the Captain meant when he spoke of horrible tentacles. One of them had already wrapped around her at the very first moment she found herself alone, squeezing her into a frightful depression. She shook it free with an actual physical effort and forced herself to climb the stairs to the second floor. Under the tap of her heels, the marble and metal rang resoundingly. She clicked down the hallway, found the key in her alligator bag, and opened the first right-hand door.

A scalding bath would relax her, make her feel better, she thought as she crossed to the table to light the lamp.

Out of the darkness a gentle old voice said, "Gina, *carissima*, no!"

She was startled to a point where she couldn't move.

"Gina, *carissima*, I've frightened you. It's Pietro—Pietro Nucci." The Italian words were tender, solicitous, and worried. "I'm hunted, child. That's why I wait here like a prowler. I beg of you, pull down the window shades before you show light in this room."

The very fact of obeying brought an alleviation of the fear which held her so rigid. Pietro would protect her with his life, rather than harm her.

**The Month's AMERICAN Mystery Novel**

She drew the window curtains closely and lit the lamp. The circle of its radiance reached out and stroked the ebony sheen of her piano, high-lighted the gray silk cushions of the English divan, polished the highboy in the corner, and softened the marble of the antique fireplace.

It took her an instant to find the old man, hunched in a chair and half cloaked by the shadows beyond the piano. The sight of him sent pity surging through Gina.

His hawklike face was sunken and wrinkled beneath the silvery hair, but his penetrating eyes still held a twinkle. He wore a thin black overcoat, now rusty and shapeless, with the collar turned high. From the inadequate sleeves, his hands jutted out and clung like delicate claws to the arms of the chair.

"Pietro, darling." She ran and knelt beside him, and suddenly put her arms about his bony shoulders and kissed him with affection. "You frightened me nearly silly, sitting here in the dark like this."

Questions poured out with nervous quickness as she spoke her familiar Italian: "How did you get in? How did you find out where I live? Why didn't you telephone, or come to the opera house?"

She gave him no time to answer, but got to her feet, quickly disposed of her hat and fur coat, and settled herself on the floor at his feet.

"You've forgotten I said I was hunted. You know nothing of being hunted, child." He reached out one transparent hand to stroke her hair.

"Jackie!" It was both question and exclamation. The scene at the opera house struck like a blow. Her red lips closed and eyes grew round.

HE STUDIED her, puzzled. "I had your address and Signora Marlowe's. I called you by phone from Grand Central Station, but you were not here. So it was the Signora I first went to see. I would have gone to the opera house earlier, but many seek me, as I say, and I didn't dare."

"What makes you think you're hunted, Pietro?"

"I am in this country illegally," he told her. "I have missions to perform. There are Fascists here who hate me and who would kill me. The authorities of this country also seek me to send me away. But my missions are nearly finished. I have been in hiding at a friend's home in New Haven and must return there as soon as possible, lest I be seen and recognized." His hand lay still on her hair.

Gina rested her head against his bony knee.

"I bring you a message from Rodolfo, who is dead, child. I am very tired, *carissima*."

Gina left him, poured a glass of wine, and brought it back to his chair. He sipped it slowly, and his old eyes brightened as she settled herself at his feet again.

"I bring a strange story of plaques, child—the ones I cast many years ago of you and your brother. It is very short. Ten years ago Rodolfo saw that some day the Fascists would strip him of everything. He took those plaques from the gateposts of his villa and brought them to me with much money. I recast them in solid platinum, which I covered with bronze.

He took them back to the gateposts and replaced them there.

"Six years ago when he was already in prison, he got word to Signora Marlowe, who secured the plaques and brought them to you. He could trust the guard, who was friendly, to carry the message asking her to bring you family keepsakes, but to tell their value he didn't dare. He didn't even dare put the information in a letter. I doubt that you would have received the letter anyway. The Fascists see to everything. For quite some time they have carefully read all my mail. It has taken me many years to bring that message to Signora Marlowe and you."

"Platinum," Gina whispered. "The little prince and princess— Grandfather was very clever, Pietro. He finished his opera while he was in jail, and in it he put a little song that he used to sing to my brother and me when we were children. The song was to tell us that he had hidden something which we would like very much—usually sweets and cookies, which our governess forbade. He must have figured that some day I might hear *Cesare* or sing in it and that I would recognize the little song."

Gina sighed. "It just so happens that the words fit, too. It was a hint for me if I was smart enough—a hint that might tell me the truth if your attempt to reach me should fail. Still, I probably would never have learned without your coming, if it hadn't been for the insight in a blind man's brain."

The wrinkled face clouded in anxiety. "The plaques. Do you still have them?"

"Yes." She kissed him, and his deep-set eyes were misty.

"My mission is finished, child," he said. "It's time I go."

"Wait, Pietro." Gina spoke in a whisper. "Do you think you were followed when you came here? It's important that I know how you got in."

"Your cleaning woman, child. She was here."

"She comes every evening while I'm at the opera house."

"I convinced her I was an old man and harmless, a friend of your grandfather's. She allowed me to stay."

Gina's attention was divided between his words and a footfall, no more than a scrape of leather against tile, in the hall outside her door.

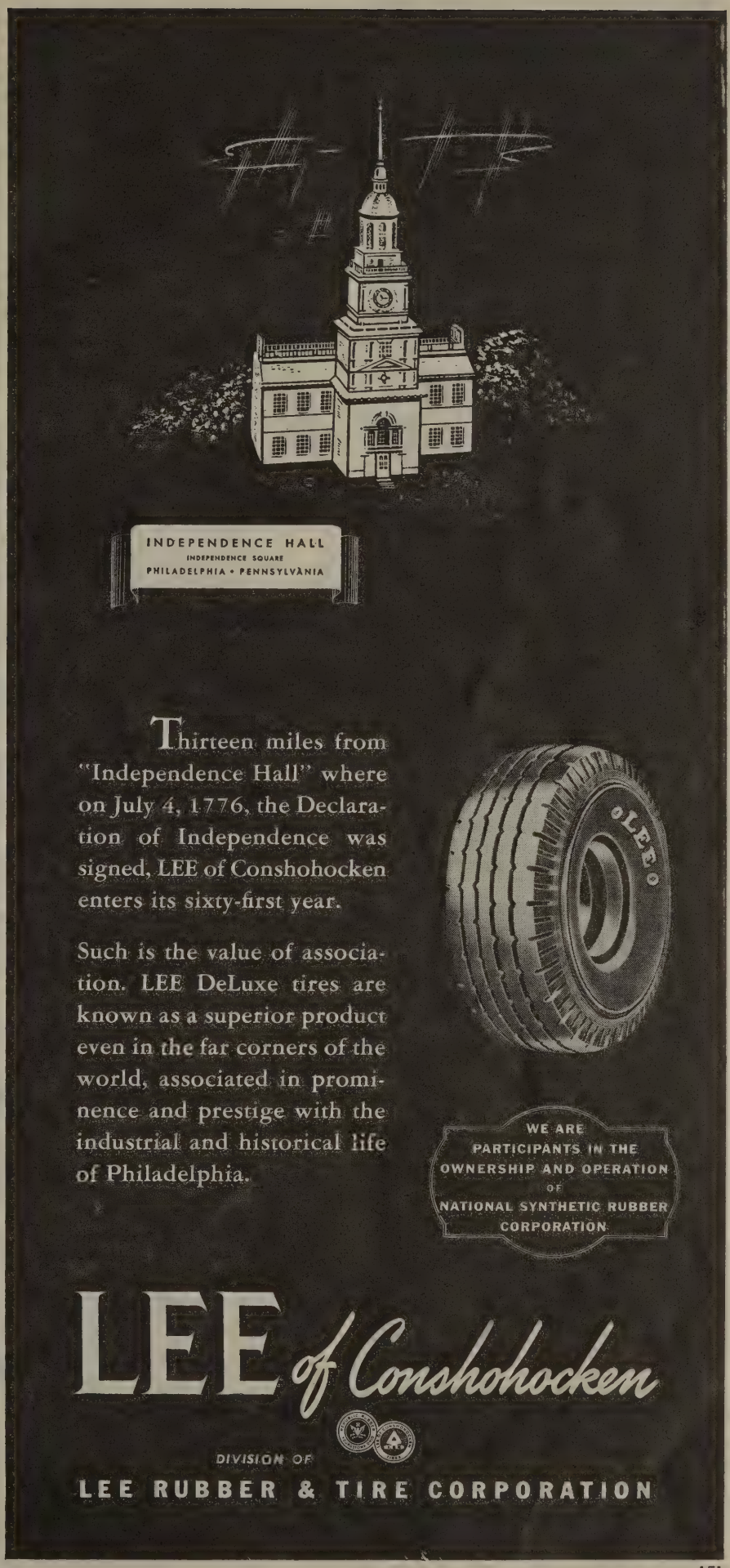
AT THE sound, the old man changed. He came to his feet with surprising speed, and his thin right hand flashed up his sleeve, to appear with a shining stiletto.

Gina spoke with infinite patience: "If nobody followed you here, Pietro, the sound we heard in the hall just now was made by a policeman. He's been sent here to guard me from danger, I'm sure. Put your stiletto away now. What we need is trickery, not force. I'm the one who will have to help you leave."

"I'm sure I wasn't followed here, but the hunted are wary." He took his hand from her arm, and the cloth of his coat swished softly. "You spoke of the police and danger, *carissima*. Have I brought you danger?"

She waited impotently, searching for an answer. Already she was wise enough in the ways of the New York police to realize that after Pietro's visit to Jackie they must want him for questioning in connection with the murder, if nothing else, and would have broadcast a state-wide alarm.

Well, let them find him without her help! She believed him and was positive everything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he had told her was true. He loved her and trusted her. She certainly was not going to turn him over without giving him a chance. There would be questioning, internment, and perhaps deportation. He would never understand. Loss of faith in Rodolfo D'Auria's granddaughter would leave him an old, old man with nothing to cling to, and destroy the burning spark that had kept him alive.

"Danger?" Determined to say nothing of Jackie, she contrived to make her voice sound light, despite her concern. "I exaggerated, darling, as singers do. I have some jewels, and an attempt was made to break into my dressing-room. My manager, seeing a chance for publicity perhaps, has arranged for a policeman to guard me."

GINA listened again, but heard nothing.

"There is a stairway at the back, Pietro. I will go out first, see that this second-floor hall is clear, and you come out and prepare to go down the rear stairs halfway. I'll walk down the front stairs, making a noise with my heels. Under cover of the noise I make, you go quickly to the stairway in the rear, go down halfway, and wait in the turn. I'll go out the front door, and the policeman will be sure to follow me. Give me time; then you come out, and you're free."

His arms went about her, and for one brief instant he held her close and kissed her. "I'm free when I'm dead, child," he told her.

Gina turned on the light, put on her hat and coat, and turned out the light again. Opening the door, she stepped out unconcernedly. The badly lit corridor was vacant.

She walked to the stairway at the front and noisily started down, alert for any signs of life in the lower hallway. She tried to hear Pietro, but the second-floor hall was as silent as the one below.

She paused for breath at the landing. Her caution began to seem silly. The footsteps she and Pietro had heard might have been any late homecomer slightly the worse for wear. Racked by strain, for a time she had forgotten that others lived in the building. She put a hand on the banister and went on down.

The downstairs hall was empty. She gave it a glance, tried the front door, and found it hard to open. After some tugging, it came quite easily, wrapping her up in a sheet of freezing wind.

Behind her an unoiled door hinge creaked. That would be the policeman. She knew she should leave without looking, but she had to turn around.

The door of the first apartment on the left had blown open. The dim hall light was enough to show her a man in a camel's-hair coat. He was lying still, with his legs out straight, and his face was quite white. A clouded bruise marred his forehead. The shoes on the man were brown.

The cold knob she was holding slipped from her fingers. The front door closed, with a sigh from the big, brass door-check up at its top.

She ran down the hall, screaming, "Pietro, Pietro, Pietro!" and tore up the stairs to the landing.

Not until she had gathered his frail old body up into her arms did she notice the slim stiletto over his heart. The haft was nearly hidden in the folds of the rusty coat. Blood dripped down and matted her furs, as Jackie's furs had been matted.

"Pietro," she whispered.

He looked at her once, and died without a sound. . . .

Sunlight streamed in through the diamond-paned doors of the Captain's penthouse terrace and made designs on the office floor. Gina shifted uncomfortably on the red leather divan and tried for the twentieth time to find a restful position.

Maclain reached into a drawer, took out a box, and dumped the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle onto the desk-top before him. His fingers made journeys through the pieces of cut-up wood, tracing outlines, selecting, and swiftly rejecting. Two pieces fitted together, and then a third—a legerdemain too swift for Gina to follow.

Michl pulled at his chair to move it closer, and sank back in quick frustration.

Davis relaxed his somber face. "I've been here a hundred times at least, and I still can't remember that the chairs are made fast to the floor."

"I'd banged into those chairs a hundred

*E. Atkins*

**'Don't you think it's about time you were terminating your membership in the Lonely Hearts Club?"**

times at least," said the Captain, "before I found there was one sure way to keep my guests from putting them in my path from the desk to the door."

He raised his head and turned, as though he might read the expressions of those about him. "Because of my blindness, my office has certain peculiar features. Everything that is said in here is picked up by a detecto-dictograph set in the wall, and recorded on a dictaphone in the adjoining room."

Michl said, "I'll have to watch my singing around here, then. I'm under contract for my records."

Ed Trapper put his pencil away and asked, "What's all that for?"

"My personal use only," said Maclain, "but I felt that, in fairness, all of you should know it before any of us says anything more. You've been most considerate, all of you, in answering my request for a conference, since I'm acting for Dane."

THE Captain's fingers resumed their task. "Gina was here before the rest of you," he announced, his blind eyes holding the room. "A lot of things may be made much clearer if you hear what she said to me."

Ten pieces of the puzzle were together on his desk, a splotch of color against the polished top, forming an irregular design.

He turned in his chair, selected a record from the rack beneath the dictaphone, and slipped it on the machine. The cylinder began to whirl, the reproducer went down, the Captain flicked a switch, and voices came from the radio-phonograph across the room startlingly loud and clear.

Gina sat transfixed, hearing herself as she answered the Captain's questions and poured out her story of Pietro's nocturnal visit. The voices ceased, and she found she had wadded her handkerchief into a tight, hard ball.

The Captain removed the cylinder and replaced it in its felt-lined case amid a silence deep as the sea.

Ed Trapper broke it: "So those plaques are platinum. Ingenious, what?" He whistled softly. "No wonder there were a couple of murders. Well, at least you have them safe, Gina baby. I know a man who'll get you top prices and have them reproduced in bronze. Until then, you'd better turn them over to me."

The Captain swung back to his puzzle. "Mr. Trapper has a knack of getting at the heart of things. It's a pity that two rather violent killings can't be dismissed with such nice simplicity."

Davis said, "At least, we know what the murderer was after," found another toothpick, and gnawed moodily. "He evidently spotted Callahan, whom I sent to guard Miss D'Auria, and lay in wait for him in the vestibule. Callahan came up the steps and our friend conked him, dragged him inside and into that vacant apartment. Then he must have heard Miss D'Auria coming down the front stairs and he started up the back stairs. But he ran smack into the old Italian. The old man probably got frightened and pulled his stiletto. Only, our friend was stronger."

The Captain picked up a piece of the jigsaw puzzle and held it extended before him. "Barring the fact that Gina hasn't the plaques, Davis, that she didn't take them home last night, and that they've disappeared from her dressing-room at the Knickerbocker Opera House, it's as simple as one-two-three."

Trapper started to his feet, his white eyebrows bristling. "But they were gone right


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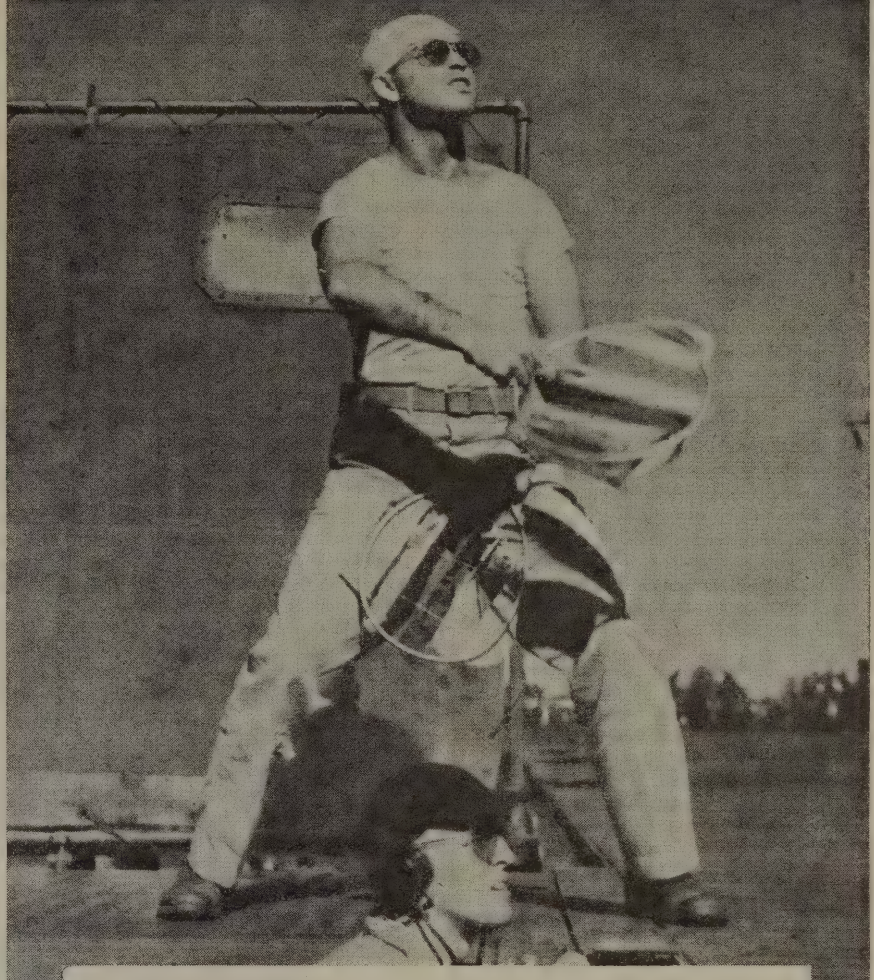

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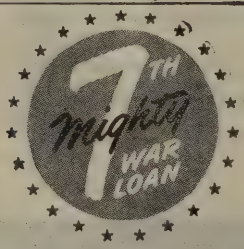


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after you left, Gina. We went out onto the stage with Davis, and when I looked back into your dressing-room they were gone."

The Captain asked, "Who's 'we'?"

Davis told him, "Mr. Marlowe, Trapper, and Considine."

The Captain slowly moistened his underlip. "And that left no one in the dressing-room."

"No one," said Davis, "but there was a man on the door."

"The man you left on the door followed us onto the stage," said Arthur Considine.

Ed Trapper turned to Gina: "Good Lord! Is that right? You didn't take them home?"

"I'm quite positive she didn't," said Duncan Maclain. "Two plaques that size would make quite a tidy package, Mr. Trapper, and heavy, too. Gina was carrying nothing but her handbag when she got into my car. I drove her directly home."

DANE MARLOWE snapped out, "Whoever took those plaques certainly must have known their value."

"In the words of Jerry Colona, it's silly, isn't it?" The Captain fitted another piece into his puzzle. "The murderer finds out a ten-year-old secret known only to Pietro Nucci and Gina's grandfather. This impetuous fellow kills Mrs. Marlowe before she can pass the news on to Gina—"

"Damn' silly," said Davis. "Whereupon, he steals the plaques right from under our nose, and after he's stolen them he hides them away so that he can go make another attempt to steal them from Miss D'Auria's home."

"Maybe you have it, at that, Davis." The Captain swept the pieces of his jigsaw puzzle into a box and put it in the drawer. Under Gina's eyes he seemed to lose his radiating quality of human warmth and stiffen like a figure turned to stone.

"Have what?" asked Davis.

"The reason why the killer went to Gina's." The Captain was talking to the ceiling. "You know and I know that the outstanding trait of any brilliant crook is that he can't let well enough alone."

"Then you think this killer's brilliant?" the inspector demanded.

The Captain thoughtfully chewed one finger. "It's the sort of thing I might do myself," said Duncan Maclain. "If I killed a woman to get a valuable pair of plaques, and then succeeded in stealing them, I might very well stage a second attempt—*attempt* I said, Larry—particularly if I thought that my theft was undiscovered."

"It wasn't undiscovered," Davis protested.

"Oh, yes, it was," the Captain persisted. "You've admitted, yourself, that you and everyone in the opera house thought that Gina had taken the plaques safely home."

"Okay, brilliant brain." Davis stuck out a finger with theatrical emphasis. "Let's be frank, open, and gay, like girls dancing around a maypole. You cloud up your dictaphone disks with so many blind deductions that I'd rather hear the radio play *Night and Day*. Just for once, suppose I ask and you answer."

"Those elks' teeth on your watch chain jingle when you wave your finger at me, Larry." The Captain leaned back, grinned, and became more human. "Your impetuous method of handling things will probably confuse me no end, but I'll do my best. Take it away."

Davis sank back resignedly, staring at his offending hand. "The killer knew about the

**The Month's AMERICAN Mystery Novel**

value of the plaques. At least, that's what you say. How?"

"From Nucci." The Captain locked his hands behind his head.

"Then why didn't he make an attempt to steal them before last night?"

"Because he didn't know about them before last night, Larry. Does that sound okay?"

"It has its points. Go on."

Gina was suddenly conscious of Arthur flushing uncomfortably. He was being gazed at by Ed Trapper, Dane Marlowe, and Michl Soulé.

The inspector was shaking his head. "It doesn't make sense, Maclain, and you know it. Why should old Minestrone keep his mouth shut for ten long years and then start bleating his brains out yesterday?"

"He didn't consider telling his secret to Mrs. Marlowe bleating his brains out." The Captain's voice was a monotone. "Servants are much like detecto-dictographs, Larry. Sometimes you don't even see them, yet they unerringly record every word you have to say."

"I have a houseman and a maid," said Dane, "and neither of them speaks Italian."

Arthur Considine left his chair as though pulled by strings. "It's easy to see what you're driving at." His color had faded away. "I'm sticking to my story. I drove Jacqueline downtown and waited outside in her car until I got worried and went in. Nobody saw me enter, because even the stage-doorkeeper had run inside to the stage. I sat in the hall while Nucci talked with Jacqueline and heard nothing that was said. You know I couldn't have taken the plaques."

"Not unless you were very quick and hid them some place near the dressing-room." The inspector's words were speculative only.

"You know there's no possible way I could have killed her." Arthur's voice slipped into a slightly higher key.

"Not unless you left the car right after she did and ran around to the front of the opera house and got in somehow and out again through the auditorium."

GINA realized her fingers were hurting badly. Looking down, she saw they were clenched to whiteness. There was a door in the front of the opera house, and how many of the cast used it to escape the eye of the vigilant stage-doorkeeper, she didn't know. She did know that she and Ed and Dane and Michl all had keys and that she had given one to Arthur Considine herself. She did know the stage-doorkeeper had said that Jacqueline Marlowe had entered the opera house alone.

Shaking inside, she watched Arthur standing stiff and still, his mouth half open. There was something worse—something that threatened to tear her composure into shattered ribbons. He had a key to her apartment, a key she had lent him so that he might practice on her piano every day.

Maclain began to speak—words that seared like cold dry ice in the midst of her quandary: "Mr. Marlowe informed the inspector that his wife had willed you twenty-five thousand dollars, Mr. Considine. Did she tell you about it during the evening? It seems that her will was altered only yesterday."

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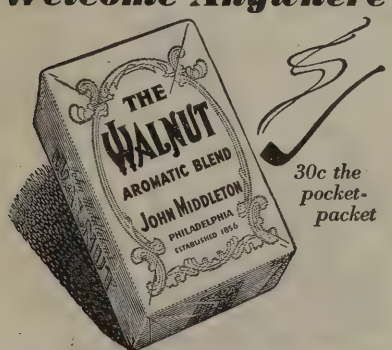


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"Yes." Arthur's mouth closed, fishlike, on the single word.

"Did you think it so unimportant that you haven't even mentioned it?"

"Yes." Two bright spots popped out on Arthur's cheeks.

In the corner someone chuckled, and it sent a ripple up Gina's spine.

"You might call me doubly guilty, monsieur. I learned this morning that she willed me fifty thousand. She must have liked me, *non?* Even though we were married for two long years and most unhappy," said Michl Soulé.

MORE talk and more questions. Were murders all talk and questions? Voices rolled on interminably about Gina, divorcing Pietro and Jackie from any resemblance to figures who had ever lived and breathed, spoken to her, been sorrowful and gay. She became involved in a network of complicated thoughts which held her steadfastly twisting her handkerchief into more shapeless form. Finally she found herself seated at a lunch table with Arthur and Duncan Maclain, wholly unconscious that the others had gone away.

Cappo, a black-faced giant in a starched white coat, served them crabs *en coquille*, which she ate but could not taste, salad, dessert, and coffee. Arthur sat woodenly, resenting the luncheon invitation, which he felt to be a command, pushing untasted dishes away.

The Captain talked, making light of his blindness, explaining how life in darkness could be fun, how books became more vivid, music more alive and poignant, people more interesting when you heard only voices and pictured their owners as actors in a play. He told why he had become a private investigator after losing his sight in the first World War; of his endless drive to prove to his own satisfaction that blindness had not robbed him of life—that Duncan Maclain was as good as, or better than, any man who could see.

Eating skillfully and finding his food without apparent effort, he chatted of his dogs: Schnucke, trained by the Seeing Eye, gentle as a lace-capped old lady; and Dreist, a second German shepherd which they had not seen, trained for police work—no pet, Dreist, but a powerful weapon which attacked without warning at any hint of danger to his master, fast and dangerous as a loaded sho-sho gun.

Gina forced herself to listen, interspersing comments of reticent politeness. What was he thinking beneath his endless chatter? Was his smile sympathetic or full of amusement at human transparency?

He shifted with the coffee, stabbing out as adroitly as a conversational boxer who has feinted, parried, and at last found an opening to strike through a tight defense.

"You could have killed Jacqueline Marlowe if you had had a key to that door in front of the opera house, Arthur"—footwork with words, a straight, flat punch giving no time for Arthur to resume his guard.

"I have a key," said Arthur.

Gina spilled coffee in her saucer. "I gave it to him. I'm entitled to have friends visit me in my dressing-room if I want them to. There are lots of others who have keys. You don't keep beating them down, Captain, questioning them again and again."

The rebuke in her voice brought a sober smile to his mobile face. "Sometimes I am most harsh with the people I like the best. I have to be if I hope to outsmart Davis. He's one of the most intelligent men I know. He's

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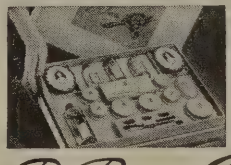

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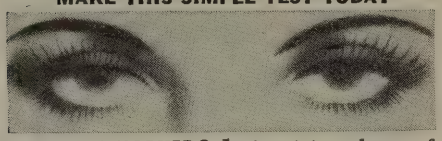

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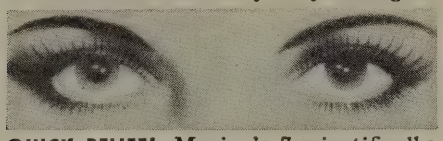

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already learned about the key. The fact that both of you failed to tell him is sure to annoy him. His methods of questioning may be far worse than mine. I presume you're innocent, Arthur?" His eyebrows arched in inquiry.

"I've never harmed anyone in my life. I don't intend to—"

The Captain lifted one hand in a gesture. "Innocent but touchy, Arthur. The police have a job to do. If I can make you mad enough before Davis gets to you, I may be able to save you a lot of pain."

Gina reached across the table and touched Arthur's hand. "Please trust Captain Maclain."

"They think I killed her. They think I murdered the woman who helped me—killed her for money and to steal the plaques that belong to you, Gina."

"They certainly do," said Duncan Maclain. "Maybe you and I had better take a trip up to the music-room of the Marlowe house and start all over again." . . .

GINA caught a sky-top cab downtown. Winter sun poured through the transparent roof. Under the heady combination of brilliance and snapping cold, she huddled back in the corner, listening in desultory fashion to the talkative driver, who knew very little about the war but apparently had much to say. The years of rigorous musical discipline overcame her distraction and brought her back firmly to the problems of *Cesare*. There was much rehearsing still to be done. She hummed a few bars of her part, and temporarily murder was far away.

Gina started across the stage, her light footsteps echoing in a hollow resonance which intermingled with the other noises. The heart of the Knickerbocker was under the stage, and the floor was laid on a hollow gridiron of supports checkerboarded with trap doors of different sizes and functions. The resonance was dispelled during a performance by laying down stacks of colored canvas cloths arranged in the reverse order of the acts, so they might be peeled off one by one as the scenes were changed.

The effect of walking on such a gigantic drum brought back Duncan Maclain's remark of the night before while she was waiting for Jackie: "I'm certain I heard her footsteps on the stage many minutes ago. She was crossing with someone else just as Michl started to sing."

With someone else—Gina stopped and stared, horrified, at the door to the little cubicle straight ahead, filled with the first real glimmer of what might be working in the mind of Duncan Maclain. If the murderer had used the key to the door at the front of the house and gone down through the auditorium to hide in the cubicle, Jackie would have crossed the stage alone.

Someone touched her arm, and she started violently.

A voice said, "Don't take it so hard, Gina. It's done and we can't help it."

She turned to face Dane. He looked tired and wilted, and had lost the spruce appearance and some of the cockiness he had displayed during the morning while interviewing Maclain. The expensive blue suit was dusty

*Scott Brown*

**"I was leaning over looking at some croquet sets in your Sporting Goods Department and . . ."**

and marred by a grease spot on one knee.

Gina said, "You startled me."

"Obviously." He forced a grin which looked ghastly under his waxed mustache. "As I said, you're wrecking yourself. Not that I can blame you entirely, for everything since last night has been startling me."

"I can't forget it, Dane."

"Neither can I, but yet, much as I hate the expression, Gina, I have to remind you that the show must go on. It's your business and mine. Look!" He pointed to the right. "They're setting Act Three of your grandfather's opera. That's the old tower by the water, where the mist rolls in from the sea and hides the dying Caesar as the curtain comes down. I've been supervising the mechanical equipment—a new set of steampipes to bring the mist in from the sea."

He was talking about steampipes and the handle beneath the stage which turned them on, but Gina's mind was far from steampipes as he held her arm and walked her along. It was on footsteps crossing the stage the night before and Jackie pushed suddenly into the cubicle by someone who must have known the knife was there, not to be removed under penalty of the law.

They passed the darkened doorway.

Dane said, "God, I'm tired. I hope all your whisky isn't gone."

Across the stage the powerful voice of Michl Soulé was raised in a burst of song.

SHE was glad to find Ed in her dressing-room, and for once found herself welcoming his businesslike censure:

"Metcalfe's been playing Chopsticks on that piano in the rehearsal-room for an hour, Gina baby." Ed's belligerent eyebrows bristled at Marlowe as though Dane were personally to blame for her lateness.

Dane vanished back of the screen in search of stimulant, and Ed turned his fatherly tirade toward his charge.

"Even if they kill the whole ballet you're still under contract," he began impatiently. "You're not reading lines in a melodrama, Gina baby. You're supposed to be singing an aria. Metcalfe says that so far you've been lousy."

"I'm sorry, Ed. I know I'm late." Gina hung up her furs in the closet.

"Of course," said Trapper, "I can always get you a job if they revive *The Merry Widow* again, or perhaps *The Prince of Pilsen*. If you don't like rehearsing you can always sing a song." He started a restless pacing.

Dane appeared from behind the screen, swallowed half a tumbler of whisky neat, and said to Trapper, "For the love of God, sit down." He disposed of the tumbler and went out, leaving Ed with a farewell frown.

Gina said weakly, "Ed, I can't rehearse until I've rested half an hour."

He stopped pacing, stared at her hard, and was instantly solicitous, his brusqueness gone. "Lie down, Gina baby. You're better than any of them without any rehearsal. I'll be back in a minute. I'll explain to that Metcalfe clown."

She stretched out on the silken couch and closed her eyes.

A few minutes later Ed came back and sat down. "He'll wait. What's the matter, Gina—Arthur?"

"Partly." She opened her eyes. "He's so helpless, Ed."

"Yeah. What else? Did Marlowe upset you?"


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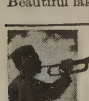

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"Oh, this morning, and crossing the stage just now."

"What about this morning? You're not letting that blind man get you down?"

"It's Michl, Ed." Her hands lay laxly beside her.

His keen blue eyes changed color. "Michl? What the hell has Michl—?"

"He never said anything last night about being married to Jackie. He was joking after—"

"He's like that, Gina baby. He probably thought everybody knew it. Pagliacci—he laughs, and hurts inside."

"Whoever stole the plaques knew about their value, Ed."

"What's that got to do with Michl?" He leaned forward, his hands tight on his knees. "You don't think Nucci went to Michl?"

"There was a way Michl might have guessed those plaques were valuable," said Gina. She told him about Maclain and her grandfather's song.

Ed said, "I've managed him nearly fifteen years, Gina. You've got him all wrong. You're trying to cover Arthur."

"There's the fifty thousand dollars, Ed."

"You've got him all wrong. What the hell does he need with fifty thousand dollars and your plaques? He's the king of song."

"There's more, Ed."

"What?"

"A trust fund of two hundred thousand dollars. Jackie set it aside for him after their divorce and kept it a secret."

"Her attorneys would know it, and Dane's "

"No." Gina shook her head. "She didn't want Dane to know it, so she didn't tell her lawyers because they'd be sure to tell him. He was jealous."

TRAPPER got up. "Look, Gina baby; I don't blame you for breaking your neck to cover Considine. I think you love him. But if there's any such trust fund set aside for Michl I'd know about it, just as I know everything about you and your financial affairs."

"But she told me. She was always fond of Michl, even though they split up. She felt that he was just an overgrown kid and temperamental, Ed, and that she was the one to blame. He spends money like water—"

"While he earns it like wine," said Ed.

"I know," Gina agreed, "but Jackie wanted him to have a backlog. She told me she'd set aside two hundred thousand dollars in bearer bonds for Michl before she married Dane."

"Where?" asked Ed.

"She didn't say, but she did say that if Michl learned about it he would run through it in no time." Gina was plaintive. "Singers do occasionally end up penniless, Ed, even the best of them. I've heard you say so yourself. You keep telling me that it's part of the game."

Trapper shook his head. "You're all wrong, Gina. You just said Michl knew nothing of this fund. Then why in the devil would he want to kill her without knowing he had something to gain?"

"He may have found out."

"I still claim that I'd have known about such a fund," Ed maintained seriously.

"But she told me," Gina persisted.

"All right," said Ed. "She told you, but think about Dane."

"What about Dane?"

"You're trying to point out, Gina, that Michl gets two hundred and fifty thousand dollars by Jackie's death. Dane gets five mil-

lion. You've said yourself Dane was jealous. I'll tell you something else—he and Jackie had quarreled—at least, she was leaving on a special mission overseas within the next couple days, to be gone for months, maybe longer."

"She never mentioned that to me," Gina protested without much ardor.

"Well, it's true," Ed continued. "Suppose he was spying on Jackie and Considine last night. He could have overheard Nucci's conversation. He'd know about the plaques and their value. Maybe he pinched them himself to make it look like Arthur. Those plaques would be a fortune to anyone as broke as Considine. Also, he'd be the first one to hear that Jackie had left twenty-five thousand to her pet piano player."

"Ed, you can't—" His calm, unimpassioned words were engulfing her, dragging her down.

"There's more," he said. "All of us here thought you'd taken the plaques home. Dane could have made a fake attempt to steal them if he knew that Considine had a key to your apartment. He could have run into Nucci in the hall and had to kill him because the old man pulled his stiletto. Think about Dane, Gina baby, and you'll see that you've got Michl wrong."

"Ed!" She sat up quickly. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to the police," said Trapper. He picked up his hat and coat and was gone. . . .

HER attempt to relax only made her more tired. She gave it up after fifteen minutes and walked down the hall to the rehearsal-room, to find that Metcalfe was not there. She sat down to wait, strumming idly on the piano.

Gina waited in the rehearsal-room a little longer than ten minutes, then went in search of Metcalfe. If she didn't find the assistant conductor soon she'd lose an entire day.

When she left the rehearsal-room she stood in the wings for a moment, close to the spot where she and Maclain had stopped the night before. There were only two men on the stage now, busy with some piece of construction. As she watched, a backdrop went up slowly into the flies, raised like a window sash by heavy counterweights which worked over pulleys in the gridiron eighty feet above.

The assistant conductor had a small office off the third fly floor. Gina started across the stage to take the elevator up on the other side.

She had covered a third of the distance when an unseen voice from one of the flies above called, "Joe!" One of the two men working on the stage looked upward just as Gina circled a small chest of carpenter's tools which stood in her path.

It was then that panic froze her, and the world stood still at the sight of the guy named Joe. His face had turned into a wild, white mask surrounding two crazy eyes. His wide-open mouth emitted no sound. Running toward Gina, he suddenly flung his heavy body straight through the air, crashed into her middle, and knocked her ten feet backward in a stunning, breath-taking blow.

Within a foot of the carpenter's tool chest a sandbag crashed with the force of a canvas bomb, raising great splinters from the heavy wooden stage. Men appeared from nowhere, yelling futile curses into the flies above.

The stagehand picked up Gina, who clung to him weakly.

"I'm sorry I had to tackle you, lady," he said contritely, "but there wasn't much time,

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for when one of them sandbags starts falling it don't fall slow." . . .

Melody in death! It had started back in childhood and, crawling like an invisible virus, had worked its way along. Since the night before, it had sprouted like the deadly amanita, attaching itself with a fungus growth to her grandfather's little song, and now the opera house Gina loved so well had become a place of danger.

Gina was afraid. She was frightened of Dane Marlowe and Michl Soulé and Trapper and Arthur Considine. She was panic-stricken.

Life had been reduced to one stark fundamental—inertia. She dared not leave the only two men who spelled safety: the tireless, toothpick-chewing inspector, pacing back and forth before the door, and the blind man, who had both of his dogs with him now.

Another stagehand came and went, leaving more answers to Davis's impersonal questions. The ballet rehearsal-room was large. The inspector walked to the farther end, noisily dragging back a kitchen chair to near the door. Gina felt her own keyed-up body relax when he finally sat down. He took out a thin, expensive cigar, bit off the end, and lit it. When it was going nicely, Michl coughed.

"Monsieur, again I beg of you. My throat is unable to stand it. Twice before I have asked you, and you have been so kind as to put them out."

"So you sit there and let me light a third one!" the inspector remarked with poison. "Well, this time you can choke to death." He blew a lungful toward the scowling tenor, who fanned it away protestingly. "It might have been an accident, that sandbag falling down."

"Yes," said Dane. "I remember a similar case in a Shriners' temple seventeen years ago.

# CAUSE FOR DIVORCE

BY SYDNEY HOFF

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Mrs. Urticaria Morbis brought suit for divorce today against her husband, Reginald Morbis, on the ground that his expressions while listening to radio horror programs fill her with foreboding.

"He's not the man I married at all," said Mrs. Morbis in Domestic Relations Court. "When I married him he was a fine musician and used to lull me by strumming on his harp. Now he harps only on horror." Mr. Morbis countered that he loved his wife and only flexed his fingers because they felt tense since he had quit harping.

"I could stand the look in his eyes," Mrs. Morbis continued, "even when he began to imitate that loathsome laughter, but when he *insisted* on locking all the doors and windows in the house before turning on the radio I knew he was more harpy than harpist."

It turned out that some boys had sneaked up into the flies and were fooling with the rope. Personally, I think a deliberate attempt was made on Gina. With the stage so cluttered, you have to cross near the footlights from wing to wing. That sandbag was right in line. Anyone waiting up in the flies and watching—"

The Captain twisted a music rack with his restless fingers and asked courteously, "Where did you go this afternoon, Arthur?"

"I thought you and Arthur went up to Dane's." Gina moved her hand so quickly to her throat that Dreist's muzzled head snapped up, and the Captain ordered, "Down." The dog relapsed.

"I changed my mind," said Duncan Maclain. "I left Arthur shortly after three o'clock and made a trip downtown."

"And you, Mr. Considine?" asked Davis.

"I went to a music store and then to Gina's apartment on Eighty-second Street, where I practiced. A couple of hours ago I called her up for dinner. She told me what had happened here and that I'd better come down."

"The process of elimination is a fascinating thing." The Captain resumed his torture of the music rack.

Davis stiffened up in his kitchen chair. "What are you going to eliminate now?"

"Dead wood," said Maclain.

"Is that why you brought that murderous dog?"

The Captain gave a pontifical smile. "Dreist? He's not murderous, Larry. He's just efficient. He dives into the center of things, looking neither to right nor left. He'll scale a twelve-foot fence if it's in his path, or go through fire and water to get at a killer who's brandishing a gun."

The inspector chuckled grimly. "I remember once not so long ago when he took a gun away from a G-man. Even at *my* job I occasionally have a little fun."

"Tenacity of purpose," said Duncan Maclain. "He still goes straight at the object in view and ignores the smoke screens."

"I shall ignore one myself, monsieur," said Michl, and pulled his chair to another part of the room.

The inspector's gray eyes followed. "What smoke screens?"

THE Captain gave the music stand an added twist. "The platinum plaques, for one. No matter how much smoke gets in my eyes, Larry, I still can't see. That leaves me only thinking and listening."

"Listening to what?" The inspector dropped ashes on the floor.

"Questions and answers," said Maclain. "Questions and answers buried deep in a smoke screen of platinum plaques. They've gone round and round like this music stand."

"And my head," said Ed Trapper. "For the love of God, quit twisting that thing! It's getting to be quite a bore."

Dane asked, "What do you mean by saying those plaques were a smoke screen? I thought they were stolen. At least, we all know they're gone."

"Gone for a purpose," said Duncan Maclain. He placed his hands flat on his knees, and the music rack ceased to twirl. "I'll take things in order. We'll dispose of the plaques and of the people, and then of the attempt that was made today to take the life of a girl."

"If it was an attempt, monsieur le capitaine."

"Which I am certain it was, Monsieur


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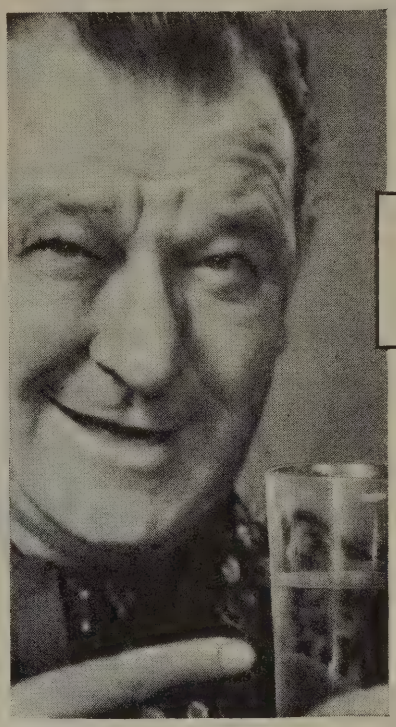

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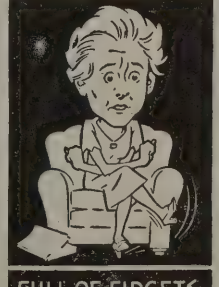

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Soulé. We will start with a simple premise. Nucci had told Mrs. Marlowe that Gina's two plaques were made of platinum. So far as we know, she died without revealing that fact to anyone. I had a hint of the value of the plaques from a line in your aria, Michl—'The little prince and princess may not be what they seem.'"

"My aria! But what—?"

"I told the Captain about it last night," said Gina. "It was a song my grandfather wrote for me and my brother when we were children. He used to hum it to fool our nurse and tell us that he had hidden candy in the piano."

"The devil with the plaques. Let's get down to the people involved. What about them?" The question came tight as a snare drum from Arthur Considine.

"The plaques will lead to the people, Arthur." Maclain leaned down and unmuzzled his dog and twirled the leather mask around his finger. "The plaques weren't stolen. At my suggestion, Davis took them from Gina's dressing-room last night and sent them down to headquarters for safe-keeping."

"That was a peach of a crazy idea." Dane moved his chair closer to Gina's. "That lunk of a cop"—he pointed at Davis—"told everyone here that Gina had taken them home. She might have been murdered, as Nucci was."

THE inspector's clipped mustache set fiercely in warning. "There are two people living who can call me a lunk. One's Larry Davis and the other's my wife. This happens to be one of the times, Mr. Marlowe, when I'll make an exception. The Captain told me to guard Miss D'Auria and watch her apartment. We're shorthanded since the war. I put one man on a four-man job, and he was half asleep on his feet. If anything happened to Nucci the fault was entirely mine."

"It seems to me the blame rests on the killer," said Duncan Maclain. "Blaming ourselves for what has happened is merely a waste of time. . . . We'll go back to our simple premise: Mrs. Marlowe drove from her home down here with Arthur Considine. She told him nothing of Nucci's conversation while he was waiting in the hall. I am coming now to the three people concerned with known motives for killing Jackie: Dane Marlowe, her husband; Michl Soulé, her ex-husband; and her protégé, Arthur Considine."

Dane Marlowe said, "Now, wait a minute."

"We've waited too long," said Duncan Maclain. "Four persons only were told by Davis that Gina had taken those plaques to her home. None of the four knew their value, and I had only guessed it through a song and chanced it might bear on Jackie's death."

"Did you count me in?" asked Trapper. He got up and stood behind Gina's chair, resting his hand on her shoulder.

"You," said Maclain, "and Michl and Dane and Arthur Considine."

"You now come into the swim, monsieur," said Michl Soulé. "You will find that the water's fine."

"Maybe she's got me down for a hundred thousand in her will," said Ed. "That's all I need to find."

"No," said Maclain. He crossed his long legs and capped his knee with Dreist's muzzle. "I talked to her attorney this afternoon. That's why I left Arthur and went downtown. Her only bequests of importance, outside of Dane's, were those to Michl and Arthur."

**The Month's AMERICAN Mystery Novel**

"She never mentioned mine to me," said Arthur Considine.

"No," said Maclain. "Nor Michl's to him. There's where we come down to the interesting process of elimination. I'm about to eliminate hours instead of people. By accepting Arthur's story as true, I'll show you she never had time."

"For what, mon ami?" asked Michl.

"To speak of her bequest to you. And of something else that Gina told me when I arrived here late this afternoon—the fact that Jackie was going overseas within the next few days."

Dane said, "But I knew she was trying."

The Captain closed his sightless eyes. "Gina knew she was going. Ed Trapper told her this afternoon. You slipped there, Ed. The only person that Jackie could have told that to was the man who killed her."

"You're crazy," said Ed.

"Follow me closely," said Duncan Maclain, "and I'll prove that she never had time. You realized it yourself after you'd talked to Gina—that's why you dropped that sandbag, loosening the rope up in the fly. She mustn't be allowed to tell anyone where she heard of Jackie's departure. It would leave you far too much to explain. It was rather neat, your telling the assistant conductor that Gina wasn't going to rehearse. It made it almost certain that she'd cross the stage to see if he was in his office."

Gina started to speak, but sat quite still. There was danger in the ballet-room. Ed's hand lay light on her shoulder, but the other was down at his side, and a cold, hard circle of metal death was pressing into her spine.

"Jackie went to her lawyer's at five," said Maclain. "Word had just come through from Washington by phone confirming her mission in Italy—a secret mission for the O.S.S. where her knowledge of Italian and the Italian people might prove invaluable. At the very last minute she decided to alter her will, leaving fifty thousand to Michl and twenty-five thousand to Arthur. She also asked if her lawyer knew an auditor who could do some confidential work for her today. I've guessed that it had to do with a secret trust fund which Gina mentioned to me—a fund that Jackie had set aside in bonds for Michl Soulé. Two hundred thousand, wasn't it, Gina?"

She nodded like an automaton.

Ed said, "Rot!"

Davis said, "Let the Captain talk."

"Two hundred thousand!" The little tenor shook his head. "Nom d'un nom! Was it worth two hundred thousand to her to be rid of Michl Soulé?"

MACLAIN went on, "I think those bonds were left with Trapper, as Michl's manager. I think they're gone. I think if Jackie had stayed alive that's what her auditors would have found out today."

"You'll have to prove it," said Trapper.

"No," said the Captain, and shook his head. His face looked worn and gray. "She left her lawyer's at six o'clock and had dinner with Arthur Considine. She saw no one else between six o'clock and the time she crossed the stage with the man who killed her. I heard her cross with someone—so, obviously, her killer did not come in the opera house front door. Your story is, Ed, that you were waiting in the publicity-room by the opera house entrance when Jackie was killed—waiting for Michl Soulé. A couple of people saw you there, it's true, including Jacqueline Marlowe as she entered alone."

The Captain straightened suddenly and his voice grew stern: "I might take a shot at constructing your conversation. She told you first what Nucci had said about Gina's plaques. But then she told you the thing that made you kill her—the fact that she was leaving for overseas. She was telling you that as you crossed the stage. And of Michl's trust fund that was going to be audited today."

"And what about Nucci?" asked Davis, his hand in his right coat pocket.

"Mr. Trapper overplayed his cards, like most good killers," said Duncan Maclain. "Arthur could have overheard Nucci's story. He had a key to Gina's apartment, and whoever made the attempt to steal the plaques must have known their value. So Ed made the attempt himself to make it look like Considine. Only, he didn't know that Gina hadn't taken the plaques home. And he didn't know Nucci was there. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt and say that Nucci attacked him and Ed had to kill him.

"If your man Callahan hadn't been so dumb, we'd have had Ed last night and he wouldn't have slipped by telling Gina of Jackie's departure. Michl couldn't have known about it. He was singing in his dressing-room and she hadn't seen him. Arthur's story I believe, for we know she came into the opera house alone. Dane was at Reuben's, so she must have told Ed at the time she was killed. It could have happened no other way."

ED SAID, "Stand up, Gina baby," and the metal disk pressed hard. "I have a gun in Gina's back," he told them all. "It's hidden where your dog can't see it, Captain. You're very clever, but a lot like me. You talk too much. It's better now if you let me walk out quietly. I've killed twice already since midnight last night, and I'll kill again if I have to, to get away."

"Ed, you can't get away with it."

"I'm trying."

"You're mad."

"Quite mad, Gina baby. Keep marching." The gun in his pocket pressed strong in her back. "We're going downstairs and out the street door."

"There are police there, Ed."

"Keep marching. Quickly, across the bridge! You're a good actress, Gina. If we meet anyone, start acting. If it isn't good you'll have sung your last song."

The dark, tortuous passage had closed now. Nine-foot walls of sheet iron hid them from workers on the stage eighty feet below. Their footsteps rang. The ballet bridge was narrow and very long.

The house electrician stopped them at the other end. "That was a narrow squeak you had, Miss D'Auria, when that sandbag dropped. I don't understand it. Something must have gone wrong."

The gun in Ed's pocket was pressing close.

"Well, anyhow, it missed me." She hoped her voice was casual.

The electrician wanted to talk more.

Ed said, "We haven't had any dinner. We have to be pushing along."

Instruments tuning in another big rehearsal-room. "Keep marching, Gina. You're doing


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fine." His voice was low. "Maybe you'll live to sing another song."

Two stagehands on the closed-in stairs. "Hello, Miss D'Auria. Evening, Mr. Trapper."

Fly floor number four, and a quick look down at pygmies moving about on the stage below.

"They'll stop us, Ed."

"Not while I have you with me." The gun barrel nudged her. "Keep moving, Gina baby."

Fly floor three, and a painter. "That sandbag—"

"Yeah," said Ed. "It nearly hit her. We haven't had dinner. We have to keep pushing along."

"The policeman on the door will stop us, Ed."

"We're going out the front of the house. Keep walking."

FLY floor two. A glance at the stage, much nearer now, and a silent prayer that he hadn't seen a sandbag that was dropping swiftly from up above on the other side. Standing on the sandbag and clinging tight to the strong hemp rope in a perilous ride to the stage below was Arthur Considine.

Dane would have thought of that—Dane, whose blueprint mind was a record of every piece of equipment in the theater. Gina pictured the bank of sandbags hanging close to the fourth floor tier. Even with Dane to handle the rope and play it out with some semblance of safety, it took a man of iron nerve to ride the sandbag down. In one swift instant she had learned a lot about the sensitive Arthur Considine.

She forced herself to turn and look at Ed. His eyes, thank heaven, were on the stairs, his bushy eyebrows set at attention, his forehead creased with a frown. Gina moved swiftly ahead into the shelter of the stairwell, and the stage was hidden from view.

Ed's voice was low in her ear, his breath warm on her neck. "When we reach the bottom of this flight, Gina baby, keep right on going down."

"Under the stage?"

"You got it." The gun edged her on. "We'll cross underneath to the other side and come up there near your dressing-room, then out through the house. Keep right along the right-hand aisle until we find an exit."

They were on the stage level, starting down the narrow stairs which led below, when Arthur jumped from behind with a shout of "Run, Gina, run!"

There was no place to run except straight ahead into that gloomy mass of platforms and pulleys and threatening machines.

Ed's gun fired twice. Arthur sat down on the narrow steps and slowly slumped forward, his talented hands dangling limp and still.

The bullets might well have struck Gina, for her heart seemed to die.

Ed's tone had changed: "Keep going, Gina. That Considine always was a fool. He's only made me kill again."

"They'll close in, Ed. You're trapped here. They'll use gas or something."

**NEXT MONTH'S MYSTERY NOVEL**

*This was a strange kind of murder. There had been no violence, no gun, no poison. But for an accident it might never have been recognized as murder; and but for another accident Inspector Bradley knew it would never have been solved.*

## Secret Corridors

*is the provocative story of a killer whose motive was imaginary.*

## by HUGH PENTECOST

**COMPLETE in the July issue**


"Not with you here, Gina baby."

Footsteps were pounding overhead and voices were shouting: "We've got you surrounded, Trapper. There are men at each of the stairs with machine guns. Send Gina out first and give her your gun and you'll have a chance to stay alive."

Gina said weakly, "Ed, you'd better."

"When we go up, we go together."

They passed a short flight of railless steps, dark, and roofed by a sliding trap in the stage above. She had reached a state where her head was light and terror had made her buoyant.

The voices above were louder. For a moment the gun was gone from her back and Ed was twisting a heavy valve in the steampipe. Above their heads the voices were raised, and then grew silent as though in awe.

"Ed, what have you done?"

He was back close to her again, painfully gripping her arm. "I've started the closing scene of *Cesare*," he told her. "I've opened the steam, and in five more minutes the stage will be thick as a London street with fog rolling in from the ocean to surround the dying Caesar."

He pulled her fast to the railless stairs beneath the sliding trap and held her there while the seconds ticked. The gun pressed into her back again. They ascended a little. Reaching above him, Trapper tugged until a white line showed at the stairhead.

"You'd better help," he warned her. "Dead or alive, you're going up this way."

Gina set her teeth and helped him pull. The trap slid open a yard or more. She looked up into a swirling mist—thick and white and dimming the light of an opera day.

"Stick close," said Trapper, "and don't try tricks."

They made an entrance near center stage, coming up through the floor. Steam swirled about them everywhere, billowing out from the fog pipe hidden in the wings.

The gun pressed close, as both knees buckled beneath her. She flung an arm about Ed's neck, closed her eyes, and let her weight go dead.

For a second he held her, muttering curses, then dropped her roughly, and stepped across her motionless body.

Ed's footsteps sounded loud in her ear pressed close to the floor—the only sounds in the silent house. He had gone ten paces when out of the fog she heard the voice of the Captain say, "Damn you, Trapper, you're walking alone. I've lived in a fog for twenty years, and now I'm coming to get you. I shoot by sound and not by sight. If you've killed that girl on top of the others, I'm going to make you pay."

Ed fired twice through the opera fog, and then, quite close, a big gun banged three shots so quick that they sounded like one.

Some one fell, and she raised her head. A blue automatic loose in his hand, Maclain was standing not two feet away. Dreist left his side with the speed of a boxer's fist and dived through the fog. Another body dropped to the stage.

"Hell, Maclain!" came the angry voice of Davis. "If after ten years you still don't know how well you shoot, you ought to be shot, yourself. Your man's quite dead. Now call off this idiot Dreist, for he's taken my gun away."

GINA got to her feet and found she was staggering. A furry brown bear waddled out of the fog.

"It is cold, petite, by the sea, *non?* And the voice, it is gone." Michl's comical head popped up from the thick fur collar to emit a rusty note. He held out both arms, and Gina crept into their grateful warmth.

"The so brave Monsieur Considine is still quite alive, petite, and will play again his very bad music. A bullet in his arm and thigh." His pudgy hand patted her shoulder, and she began to weep comfortably on the fur of Michl Soulé.

When she raised her head, Maclain was gone. "Where's the Captain, Michl?"

"Who knows?" he said. "I have known him long, and sometimes he's here and sometimes —*non*. He hates to kill and he loves life much, as you and I love music."

"I wonder if I could love life so well," said Gina, "if I knew that my life had neither night nor day."

"I doubt it," said Michl softly. "My friend, monsieur le capitaine, is very strong."

**THE END★★**


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